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The Digital Frontier of Manga Part II



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In my previous article,¹ I discussed the state of the manga industry and the various planned, successful, or failed avenues of digital publishing of manga as they can be seen today. The question remains, though, as to whether digital manga is truly the next generation as seen by those who read it. A blog post highlights an interesting story about just that topic, following a moderated panel at the Asia Arts Festival at the University of Kentucky:

I chatted a bit more with the panelists (one a soon-to-graduate senior, the other a freshman) and the topic somehow swerved to the manga industry, its travails, and its push to make a market for more esoteric, alternative manga (which for all intents and purposes mostly means “not BESM-standard”).

After hearing this, the freshman subsequently asked “So, like, are they trying to make it cool to read print manga?” at which both I and the graduating senior goggled for a moment before going “what the hell are you on about?”

Apparently, in his high school, it was seen as uncool to read print manga. I didn’t find out then why it was particularly considered uncool, although the perpetual-behindness of licensed releases may have been a factor, as well as a certain sense borrowed from underground aesthetics that licensed titles may have “sold out” or were otherwise “too mainstream”. It’s also interesting to note that the act of “reading manga” itself apparently wasn’t considered uncool. Just reading print manga.²

Ironically, it seems the younger generations aren’t as adverse to adapting to digital media as those more familiar and entrenched in the manga industry, such as fans who started prior to or during the manga boom in the 2000’s. A lot has changed in the manga industry over the years, even prior to the growth of digital media. Matt Thorn, a veteran translator now with *Fantagraphics*, has many

¹ <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/article.php?id=787>

² One Great Turtle. “Print Manga Is so Square Hepcat.” Web log post. The Library of Babel II. 19 Nov. 2010. Web. <http://bibliotaku.tumblr.com/post/1620097773/print-manga-is-so-square-hepcat>.

opinions on the changes in the industry. Most come back to the significant drop in translator pay. He lists his “top price [at] \$17 per page,” while *Tokyopop*, one of the biggest publishers in the industry, hired enthusiasts at \$3 per page for what Matt Thorn refers to as “not even close to a living wage.” This change in payment created a change in manga price and quality, perhaps leading to some of the misconceptions vocalized by the oblivious freshman in the introductory blog post, but also leading to the lower more affordable prices paid today. Scanlators do the same work for free with the argument that it is sometimes even better quality; *Tokyopop* paid little for their work, which helped depress wages industry-wide.

Now, Digital Manga Guild is combining the two for a profit sharing agreement. It appears the next logical step in the manga industry.³ Also, *Tokyopop*, despite being one of the two seeming giants of manga publishing, folded last week, possibly as a result of Borders’ bankruptcy.⁴ Borders was a major seller of the company’s publications.

Tokyopop was one of the first on the digital scene with its iPhone app,⁵ and their loss is a major shaker for manga fans. Meanwhile, the Digital Manga Guild is revving up exceedingly fast, “with over 1,100 members joining to take part in this manga community initiative.”⁶



President Sasahara is finalizing contracts for translation and localization groups, with files to be sent immediately. Files were received from Tokyo, and work is

³ Alverson, Brigid. “Quote of the Day | Matt Thorn on Tokyopop’s Race to the Bottom.” Robot 6. Comic Book Resources, 22 Apr. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2011. <http://robot6.comicbookresources.com/2011/04/quote-of-the-day-matt-thorn-on-tokyopops-race-to-the-bottom/>.

⁴ Thorn, Matt. “The TokyoPop Effect.” Web log post. Generic Blog, 22 Apr. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2011. <http://matt-thorn.com/wordpress/?p=495>.

⁵ Chavez, Ed, Michael Gombos, and Marco Pavia. “The Manga Industry Speaks: Taking Stock in Tough Times.” Interview by David Brothers. ComicsAlliance. 20 Aug. 2010. Web. <http://www.comicsalliance.com/2010/08/20/the-manga-industry-speaks-taking-stock-in-tough-times/>.

⁶ “Digital Manga Guild Acquires First 487 Titles.” Anime News Network. 21 Mar. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2011. <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/press-release/2011-03-21/digital-manga-guild-acquires-first-487-titles>.

expected to start this season for potential summer releases. The finished manga will be placed online first at *eManga* (<http://www.emanga.com>), Digital Manga's portal site, and then hopefully expanded to other platforms such as Nook, Kindle, and iPad. The portal is the main stream of digital revenue for Digital Manga Publishing (DMP), as they own the site, with the Kindle coming in second. However, the Nook, despite having far fewer titles than the Kindle (80 versus 200), is nearly as profitable as the Kindle. Kindle also has high fees for digital manga due to the increased file size of images, but President Sasahara insists it is a cost of doing business. Appropriateness for the iPad and iPhone must also be considered, as there are content restrictions on those devices that eliminate the publication of much of DMP's yaoi (boys love) titles.

Further hope is to have the material available regardless of region, so that one book published in English can be distributed in any English speaking country, widening the consumer range. Generally, licenses are as region specific as DVD codes. Furthermore, the project hopes to become multilingual, rather than just Japanese to English. The potential impact of the Guild is significant. In Japan, the cell phone has grown to be a major source for manga viewing, prompting Japanese publishers to relax some of their concerns with regards to approving digital content. President Sasahara says the PC has had less of an impact than the cell phone in Japan, and publishers are realizing more money can be made through digital content. This can smooth the way for a rapid increase in digital publication of manga.⁷ At present, "online sales [of printed manga] via sites like Amazon... are a fraction of retail sales, so the manga industry is still very much reliant on brick-and-mortar stores."⁸ With the recent shakeups between Borders and *Tokyopop*, this could change as fewer bookstores carry big selections and more publishers find a need for lower cost digital production.

Currently, the fans still have some concerns over how digital publishing will work out in the long run. As it is such a new opportunity, aside from the promise of the Digital Manga Guild, it is hard to determine the results. I had the opportunity to bring up this topic at Sakura Con, an anime convention in Seattle, WA, over Easter weekend. During the panel in which I presented, I asked for feedback on various aspects of digital manga publishing. The room held approximately 30-40 people, but only a handful had an iPad, Kindle, or Nook for digital reading. The Kindle user was generally pleased with the experience, while another had no idea that he could get manga on the Kindle in the first place. The

⁷ Alverson, Brigid. "Digital Manga Guild Ramps Up Quickly With New Licenses." Publishers Weekly. 12 Apr. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2011. <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/digital/content-and-e-books/article/46849-digital-manga-guild-ramps-up-quickly-with-new-licenses.html>.

⁸ shaan. "Tokyopop's Senior Editor On Why Series Go On Hiatus." Siliconera. 26 Feb. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2011. <http://www.siliconera.com/2011/02/26/tokyopops-senior-editor-on-why-series-go-on-hiatus/>.

complaint for the Nook was the lack of varied titles, as there is essentially only Vampire Hunter D and yaoi titles released by DMP. This is likely to broaden in the near future, depending on the success of the Digital Manga Guild.

Concerns expressed were backups of files – for example, if your library is on your digital device and your child drops it in the toilet, then what? Backups were a clear concern. There are digital libraries online in most cases, which is important. The Nook allows you to access any file you purchased through Barnes & Noble at any time, (As does the Kindle for Amazon . com purchases) and both have applications for reading on your phone or computer. Also, as fans are very fond of sharing or passing on titles to others, not having a resale option for unwanted texts was frustrating for some. There is likely to be a lack of cross-platform sharing, such as between the Nook and Kindle, because of proprietary file formats.

Furthermore, online viewing was a concern as it meant the reader never actually owned anything directly – company gone, content gone. This is obviously a concern with the recent loss of *Tokyopop*, so platforms like *eManga* and *Square Enix* weren't well favored by fans in the discussion.⁹ *eManga.com* allows readers to rent for 72 hours or buy the manga, but the content is held on the company's website, rather than on the reader's computer or other device. There are plans to close down the rental system in favor of permanent purchase, and there is discussion of offering discounts on the print edition for those who previously purchased the digital edition.¹⁰

There was dissention regarding whether print would die, and the general consensus was that there would be a decrease in it as the mainstream method of reading and an increase in small publishers fitting into niche markets. Used books would continue to be important in the case of reading. There was an attendee from a non-profit that provides books to low-income populations in rural school districts, including Native American reservations, and she says she cannot keep a box of manga when she brings them. They're all gone quickly. So for those who replace physical books with e-manga, there will always be a need by those who can't be provided a Kindle or Nook, but can be provided a physical book. A \$5000 grant will buy a lot of discounted manga from a used book store, but not so many Kindles or Nooks. Another attendee, a member of the U.S. Coast Guard, made an excellent suggestion – follow the new trend in DVDs of offering a

⁹ Nowlin, Nicole. "The Digital Age: EManga." Sakura Con 2011. Washington State Convention and Trade Center, Seattle, WA. 23 Apr. 2011. Panel Presentation.

¹⁰ Alverson, Brigid. "Digital Manga Guild Ramps Up Quickly With New Licenses." Publishers Weekly. 12 Apr. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2011. <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/digital/content-and-e-books/article/46849-digital-manga-guild-ramps-up-quickly-with-new-licenses.html>.

digital copy for a little bit more. This could supplement the interest in digital media and provide a transition point from print to digital.¹¹

Such a transition could go in either direction, like President Sasahara's proposed discount on print editions for digital users, or providing a digital edition with the purchase of a print edition as suggested by the panel attendee. Interestingly, President Sasahara views print and digital as complementary rather than competitive, as seems to be the attitude of other publishers. "There are definitely two different types of customers," he said, "light and heavy users. Heavy users always want to buy the print edition; light users want to read the manga once and not keep it on their bookshelves. Just running print editions to me is like a handicap. We want to cater to both types of customers."¹² For books initially released in digital format, popular titles could see a physical print run to appease the fans that do prefer the book in hand with its new-book, just-shrink-wrapped smell.

At the end of my last article, I mused that print would decline, digital would rise, and adaptation to digital would become necessary to keep up. I don't think I was wrong, nor do I think the fans disagreed. Digital is on the rise, though where it will go we still don't know. It will be important to keep watch, especially on the rising star that is the Digital Manga Guild. President Sasahara will push digital forward, as he said, "It's important you feel comfortable and confident about the project and stay with us for five or ten years, and have your kids join the DMG ten years later."¹³ An admirable sentiment, but the person who truly ends my article is a fan of manga and a member of the Digital Manga Guild:

*I love our president's and the rest of DMG's passion to get this project up and running. If I could, I would happily do this all for free just to see it really thrive. I'm just surprised no one's ever thought of it before, because it's an excellent idea! I can't wait to get started. :D*¹⁴

¹¹ Nowlin, Nicole. "The Digital Age: EManga." Sakura Con 2011. Washington State Convention and Trade Center, Seattle, WA. 23 Apr. 2011. Panel Presentation.

¹² Alverson, Brigid. "Digital Manga Guild Ramps Up Quickly With New Licenses." Publishers Weekly. 12 Apr. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2011. <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/digital/content-and-e-books/article/46849-digital-manga-guild-ramps-up-quickly-with-new-licenses.html>.

¹³ Kokiden, and Doodlelover. "Re: Teleconference Report." Web log comment. Digital Manga. 26 Feb. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2011. <http://www.digitalmanga.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=56&t=1533>.

¹⁴ Kokiden, and Doodlelover. "Re: Teleconference Report." Web log comment. Digital Manga. 26 Feb. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2011. <http://www.digitalmanga.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=56&t=1533>.

We've reached just the tip of the mountain for what digital manga publishing can and will become in this industry, and just as the guild member says, "I can't wait to get started."